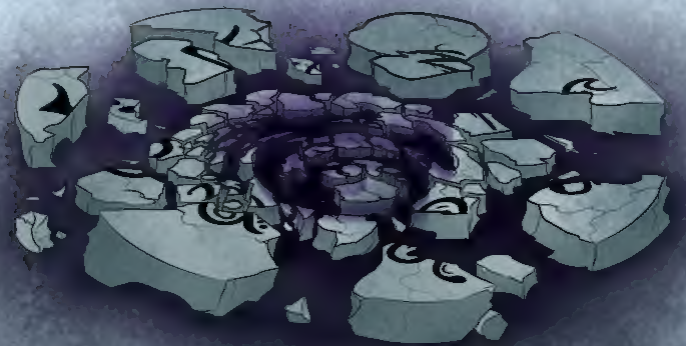
Chapter 6

Erin

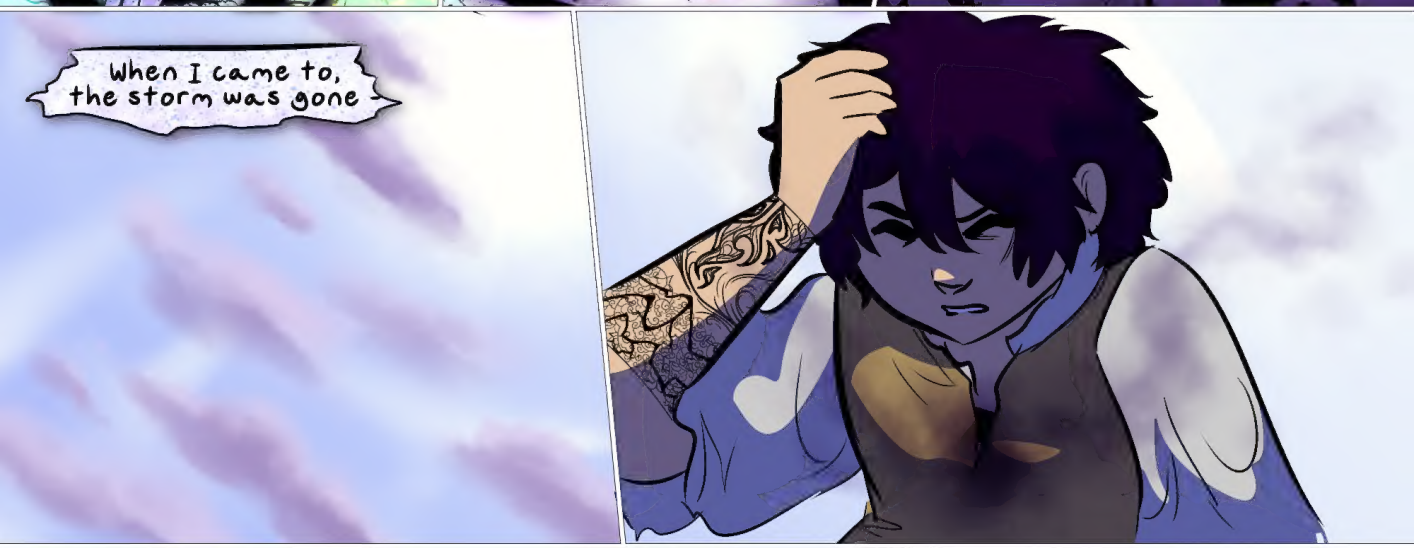


It began with my journey into the storm.
I intended to discover and document what was at its center, and I was off to a fantastic start.
I'd made great progress, even discovering some ancient ruins in the
Wait, you went into the storm alone?
I... yes.
But that's really dangerous.
Wait.
Do you not know who I am?
Uh. No.
Well -
SHFF
Does the name Ruunaser ring a bell?

No.
Wait, really?
Where are you FROM?
Vash. I didn't get out much.
Is that an emissary sigil from Asera?
Yes! Yes it is.
Though I'm not myself an emissary, my unique skills and station warranted the granting of this rare honor.
This sigil, crafted and granted by Asera themself, grants me safe passage anywhere their authority is recognized.
And as I command all six primordial elements, the storm posed no threat to me.
My name is Erin Ruunaser, but it's quite possible you know me better by my title - the Elemental Magus.
She died a hundred and thirty years ago.
...Obviously I'm the NEW one.
Oh! Okay.
Can I get back to the story?
Please do.

As I was saying, I'd nearly reached the center of the storm.
Forty miles in, I had found the ruins of the Second Great City, the lost empire of the Ancients.
The storm had arisen after their civilization -
But I still didn't know how.
That's when I broke through the storm-wall and found the center of the maelstrom.
The auroras that powered the storm were being pulled out of the sky, down into a blown-out edifice.
Something they'd been building must have gone catastrophically, apocalyptically wrong.
I had to know what it was.
And in that demolished, half-eroded Ancient complex...
I found the pedestal.

It was engraved with the six great elemental runes, and it was emitting more power than I'd ever felt before.
I quickly found the problem - the pedestal had been catastrophically damaged, which had disrupted the control runes keeping the natural flow of power contained.
Activated without control, the great runes were pulling in energy as fast as they could, and ejecting it just as quickly.
The whole storm was erupting from one malfunctioning tool -
- and I realized I could stop it.
Wait.
YOU stopped the storm?
Yes, I thought it was very impressive at the time.
Unfortunately, I didn't get to celebrate for long.


When I came to, the storm was gone

But I had a new problem.
FINALLY!

After that, well...
I'm sure you saw what it did to me.
What it did to everything AROUND me.
Do you know what it is?
I... I have a couple theories.
A worst-case scenario.
It's not important right now.
It SOUNDS important.
Well, it doesn't matter to you.
You shouldn't have gotten involved in the first place.
I think it talked to me.
It laughed when you told me to run.
I did? That was smart.
Why didn't you run?
You looked like you needed help.
Ha...
"help."
That's what it said too.
Why is that funny?

It's not funny. It's naive.
There IS no help.
Whatever took control of me could do it again at any time.
That caustic black energy it was channeling through me eats away at everything it touches. It turned me into a walking wasteland.
Anyone I go to for help will be signing up for suicide the minute I lose control.
Until I know how to control this, or better yet, sever its connection -
I'm one misstep away from becoming the single deadliest being on the planet.
Nothing could stop me.
I'm the only person who can be trusted to fix this.
And that's fine. I don't NEED help.
I just need time to think...
I have two questions.

What?
Uh, well, you said the energy ate through anything and killed everything.
Yes, I had a very good view of its impact on my surroundings.
I pity the unique wildlife I inadvertently eradicated.
But it didn't kill ME.
What?
You hit me with it when I was trying to talk to you.
It HURT, but not more than a normal burn.
Then it burned out.
So if you DO need help, I'm willing to risk it, since you couldn't, you know... disintegrate me.
You... you're CERTAIN the black energy hit you?
Yes. It was very memorable.
I don't understand...!
Even with a healing ability, it can't have...
There should still be symptoms!

What ARE you?!
That's a complicated question. Can I ask my other question first?
I - fine, yes. What's your question?
Well, this... possessing voice thing, you said it took you over easily?
Not EASILY.
I was resisting it pretty valiantly.
Was it winning?
...Yes.
Then why did it stop?
Hm.
It's possible it was tiring from the effort, or maybe it couldn't...
...No.
I remember...
It was afraid.
But... why?

I've been wondering that too.
AGH!
What - who-?!
Ah - Erin, this is my friend, Alinva.
Alinva, this is Erin. He's been possessed.
I heard.
Why were you HIDING in a TREE?!
Because you're dangerous, and Kendal doesn't have a good track record for safe life choices.
I'm not leaving him unsupervised with someone who nearly killed us both.
And for the record, YOU might not disintegrate, but I nearly DID!
I know, it was very scary. But you fixed it!
You... it was afraid of YOU!
I thought so.
I want to know WHY.

I - I'm not sure. It's hard to remember what happened while I was fighting it.
Well, try. You want to keep it scared, right?
Why's it scared of ME?
"She's already here."
But it can't actually have recognized YOU. Not PERSONALLY.
Well, it didn't sound like anyone I know.
I don't think it's actually about you, exactly.
Hold on.
The way it saw you was very strange.
It was like you were some kind of... fluctuating energy mass, spreading into the ground.
I don't know what it THOUGHT it was seeing, but it obviously wasn't really you.
Um...
Of course.

But WHY did it see you that way?
I don't have many points of comparison...
But I seriously doubt it would have that reaction to just anyone.
It definitely didn't see Kendal that way.
Is there anything unusual about you?
Born in an elemental hot zone?
Cursed?
Secret shifter ferin?
I... am a Life mage?
...Yes. I know.
You walked out of a tree. It was fairly obvious.
Right, um.
And it's not that, because I'm ALSO a life mage.
If it were just afraid of life magic, it would have never possessed me.
There has to be something else.
I suppose a cloud elf outside of the Archipelago Nimbus is FAIRLY unusual -
Unusual enough to surprise a being on that scale?
No. If I'm even close to correct, it wouldn't even have noticed.
It must've been something completely unprecedented to prompt such an extreme response-

ALL RIGHT!
Ah!
I was born with life magic!
This isn't a tattoo, it's a birthmark, and I've always been able to do life magic!
As for why I'm down here?
My birth parents probably REASONABLY ASSUMED I had the Chimeric Plague and dropped me over the edge!
I had a normal life and family for ten years -
And then I learned I was a chimera bomb and ran away for ANOTHER ten years -
And I should have died, but I didn't!
So CLEARLY everyone was WRONG about me!
I don't know WHAT I am!
And I was hoping...
I was hoping YOU knew something I didn't.

That...
is FASCINATING.
And, of course, deeply upsetting. I'm sorry your life has been so turbulent.
You're right, it's clearly not a tattoo. You MUST have been a chimeric carrier, but...
To have survived with total control?
Your connection to Life must be quite unusual.
Possibly unique.
What does that mean?
It means my intruder IS afraid of you.
You SPECIFICALLY.
That's very valuable information.
Is the offer of help still open?

Yes?
Wait, what made you change your mind?
Aren't you still "the deadliest being on the planet"?
Well, obviously not to either of you.
You've both demonstrated you can survive even if I'm taken over again - and even if we're not sure WHY yet, we know it doesn't want to confront you.
This is a stroke of luck I'd be foolish to squander.
I've already got some ideas for where we can go to fix this.
There's a monastery on Helm that specializes in soul-shaping, they should be able to-
Wait.
Wait? What?
I... want to help you, but...
There's something I have to do.
...What kind of "something"?

The CAVES?!
Don't shout! We don't know what else is out here!
Yes. Vash is down there somewhere, and I have to get him back.
...Setting aside the NUMEROUS other questions I now have, let's focus on one -
What's your plan?
TELL me you have a plan.
I've been following the sound of his voice.
No! Are you serious?
Don't you know what's DOWN there?!

Vash is down there, and so is The Collector.
That's all that matters.
Ohhhh, Wys, give me patience.
That's NOT all that matters if you're planning on SURVIVING the trip.
The Caves are part of the original anatomy of Primordial Stone - the remnants of his circulatory system.
They're incredibly resistant to magic and can't be reshaped.
They are a world-spanning labyrinth of twists, turns, dead-ends, and sheer vertical drops miles wide.
Only the branches closest to the surface have even been partially mapped.
Some branches have underwater entrances that have flooded all the way to the center of the planet.
Some are full of magma or molten metal. In some, the air itself is poisonous.
Unstable fused materials far below the surface can have unpredictable and deadly effects on travelers.
And any habitable paths down are crawling with monsters - degraded victims of cave-corruption with nothing left of themselves but ravenous hunger.
And if you don't like fighting the cave-crawlers, you'll like the alternative even less.
Within a few days, cave-corruption will start turning YOU into one of them.
Even if you find your way back without losing your mind, the damage is debilitating and irreversible.
Who's going to save Vash if you die - or worse?

Kendal, you didn't know about this?
...Vash almost never dealt with the caves.
I knew there were monsters, but...
Well - there has to be a way, right?
Of course there are ways. Just no quick, EASY ones.
At minimum, you'd need magical shielding to avoid stone- and cave-corruption. Food, supplies, climbing equipment, light sources.
You'd want to scout first, to map the safest route down and back - and ideally, have guards to keep the cave-crawlers away.
The Singing Caves are one of the hardest places in the world to safely traverse.
It's no wonder your Collector is hiding out down there.
If she can protect herself from the elements and the cave-crawlers...
There's nowhere safer for her to hide.
CRACK
...I can still try and pinpoint where she's keeping him.
That's valuable information, right?
With that information, we could start finding the shortest route through the caves to get there.
It's a good first step to organizing a proper rescue.
And... listen, once we sort out my little possession problem...
I'd be happy to help you arrange the rest of the rescue as well.
Very valuable, yes!

Wait. But the way you described it - there's so many things we'd need!
Of course.
Can you really get that stuff?!
I'm the elemental magus.
What I need, the Academy provides.
How do you think I arranged my expedition into The Storm?
Even if I weren't personally intrigued, I'd feel obligated to help you out as repayment for your assistance.
And I can't imagine the Aseran Mage Academy would pass up an opportunity to rescue a god - or to capture someone capable of abducting one.
The Collector leveled an entire city. MY city.
Can a fledgling god like Asera stand against that power?
Can you?
Alone?
So. We get my possession problem sorted out, and I get your kidnapped god back.
Sounds like a plan?

oof!
Are you okay?
I don't think so.
Is it because of the delay? I know you want to get to Vash as soon as you can.
No.
I realized something last night, when you told Erin about your family.
I realized I was alone.

Because you don't have a family?
No.
Because I didn't know that about you.
Vash knew all of his people.
He cared about them. Protected them.
He watched over them as they grew.
He was with them their whole lives.
He KNEW them.
But I don't know anyone.
I'm alone.
And it... hurts.
It didn't hurt before.
Erin talks so much, but I barely know anything about him.
And when you said your birth parents had abandoned you because of your mark...
That hurt you. Changed you.
It affected who you are.
And I didn't even know it had happened.

...Of course you didn't know. You couldn't have known.
I hadn't told you.
But it was important.
Was it?
I don't even remember it. I've never met my birth parents and I probably never will.
Just because it changed me doesn't mean it MATTERS.
Oh.
I... really don't know anything, do I?
Oh... Kendal.
You DO know me.
I'm not my past. I'm not what's happened to me.
I'm ME.
You know me as I am. Do you really need to know how I got that way?
...I don't know any other way to understand people.
I think you do.
We're doing it right now.
Just talking.
It's how mortals connect.
And I think you're already pretty good at it, honestly.
FLOMP
It's how you got me out of my tree and into the real world.

Oh.
Yeah. Easy, right?
Nothing about that was easy.
That's okay. It's hard for everybody.
Really?
Oh, yeah. Everyone just kind of starts talking and hopes for the best.
At least I HOPE it's not just me.
That sounds very confusing.
Welcome to being a person.
Thanks.
I'll do my best.

Several hours earlier, and some distance away...
CRACK
WHAM
Come on!
I didn't KNOW this was your chunk of wasteland!
HISSSSS
SSSSSSSSSS
You're being VERY unreasonable about this.

SLAM
Okay, bad news.
ZZT
Since you can't understand me-
You're getting this instead.
CRACKLE
And I don't know how to say "sorry" in Dragon-
HSSSSSS
THOO
CRACK

RAAUKH
WHAM
WHIP
ack!
Settle
DOWN!
KRAUUUM

Huh-?
ZIP
WHOOP
nnnghkay
not bad

Uh...
...hello?
SHAAA
No!
The dark avatar is risen!
The paladins must be warned!
WHOOSH
...What?